CHRISTIAN COMMON SENSE ABOUT POLITICS

The Christian religion was born in the midst of a difficult, sometimes tortuous relationship with a political state. That State, the Roman Empire, first ignored Christianity as one more marginal, ethnic cult, and then was amused by its peculiar beliefs, and then began to regard it as a threat to the public peace and to its own authority and to persecute it. Then the State decided to adopt it, to make it official, and to protect, defend and sponsor its existence and its growth. Finally, that State, the Roman Empire, was eclipsed by it. "Out of the ashes of the Empire rose the throne of St. Peter and the Papacy," is the way the historians put it.

You might even say that the relationship of church to state, of faith to politics, has been critically important to Christians from the

beginning and, further, that it has been anything but a simple matter for us.

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One day Jesus dealt with it. It's near the end of the story when the conflict between him and the religious and political authorities has deepened. A group of critics has come to contend with him, perhaps even discredit him in the eyes of his increasingly zealous followers. They ask a question for which there is no good answer: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?" The tax in question is the head tax, a hated reminder that the real authority in Israel is Caesar. However he answers, he's going to be in trouble. The Zealots, a fanatically

nationalistic political organization, of which Judas Iscariot may have been a member, held that the tax was illegal and should not be paid as a gesture of civil disobedience. Many people secretly admired them and their brave protests against Roman authority.

If Jesus said, "Pay the tax, it is legitimate," he would, in fact, have discredited himself with many people as a Roman collaborator. On the other hand, if he took the zealot position and advised not paying the tax, he would have been arrested on the spot for sedition.

His response, in that circumstance, is subtle and remarkable: "Let me see a coin," he says. The image of Caesar was on the coin – it was Caesar's money, government money.

"Give it to him," Jesus says, "it's his anyhow. Give to God what is God's"

A simplistic way to interpret his answer is that there is no connection between religious faithfulness and the political arena. And it seems, at first, as if that is exactly what he means. Religion and politics are completely distinct. Keep them altogether separate. Be an obedient citizen and a faithful Christian in separate ways. It has been a popular notion within Western Christianity: two realms – "the City of God and the City of Man," with no relationship between them. It was the theological rationale behind the ability of some Christians in Nazi Germany, to work in the death camps all week and go to church on Sunday.

That total separation of religion from politics would have been surprising to Jesus. Actually, he is teaching one of Israel's oldest and most precious creeds, the sovereignty of

God. Actually, it is a sarcastic answer and his hearers probably got it. Caesar is thrown a crumb.

"Here...look at his picture...give him what he has coming. The Lord

God, the sovereign and only King of all creation, owns everything.

You owe everything to God:
everything you have, everything you are."

The ones who have come to discredit him are astonished. It's not the answer they wanted. God is Lord of all: all individuals, all nations, emperors and empires. God is sovereign even over religious institutions. It is an amazing answer. It describes an active engagement of faithful people in the political process, but it is very clear about where ultimate sovereignty or authority lie.

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. The earliest Christian creed was "Jesus Christ is Lord" and in the days of high Roman imperialism, it was a political statement. What it meant was "The emperor is not Lord. The state is not Lord." And in that simple affirmation, Christianity deprived the emperor and every totalitarianism in history, from Nero to Hitler, to failed Marxist regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Soviet Union, the one thing totalitarianism must have and that is the unquestioned loyalty and obedience of its subjects. "Jesus Christ is my Lord" was first of all a political statement. And people who said it were not scolded for their misguided theology. They were executed for treason.

One of the most important and most precious tenets of Christian faith, as we

Presbyterians see it, is the sovereignty of God and therefore the limitations on the sovereignty of any human authority – king, government, or church. "God alone is Lord of the conscious," we like to say and by that we mean that there is about you and me something which we owe to no one but God and furthermore that good government understands that about itself.

It is why many of us are uncomfortable with the carefully planned strategy of the religious right to gain control of the Republican party. The Christian Coalition is an attempt to enforce one group's notion of what is good and true and moral on all the rest of us; an attempt to assume for itself the mind of God in matters like the right of a woman to choose an abortion, accessibility of birth control information and devices, what books will be available in school and public libraries, in the name of Christian

values and the Christian character of our nation.

The fact is that while Christian and particularly Presbyterian influences are there from the beginning, there is not and never has been a Christian nation. It is a nation in which Christians have been more free to be Christian in whatever way they wish than anywhere else in the world. And it has also been a place where people are free not to be Christian; to be Jewish, or Muslim, or Buddhist, or nothing.

The glory of this experiment is precisely its idea of the limitations of government when it comes to matters of conscience and faith and its protection of the liberty of all its citizens to follow the dictates of their own conscience.

We're different in this respect. Leslie Gelb wrote an editorial in the New York Times a

while a go in which he observed that most of the nations of the world are organized on some principle of exclusion: race, religion, language, ethnicity. And with frightening violence, exclusive groups are willing to go to war with other groups to protect their own exclusiveness.

Cornel West, head of the Department of African-American studies at Princeton, said in a speech that the loss of that sense of community, the inclusive community, is our greatest danger.

"Two hundred and eighteen years after the beginning of this precious democratic

project, democracy is fragile...particularly this notion that we are all in this together,

that if the ship springs a leak, we are all going to drown."

West and other historians note that the founders of the Republic, even though they did not include the people who were brought here as slaves, nevertheless put in place a system that acknowledges the public arena, the common good. It's in the preamble to the Constitution.

"We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union,

establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense,

promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and

our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution..."

"The general welfare." It's for all of us, not just those of us who came from Northern Europe, but those who came from Asia and

Southern Europe, and Africa and South America and those who were already here and who have the only really legitimate claim on the land.

As we head toward the end of the century, we need a renewed sense of the public good, the general welfare. We Christians particularly need to take our stand for a nation and a culture which is truly inclusive, where no one is excluded by reason of race, religion, ethnicity. And we need to make our voice heard a little more clearly when the name "Christian" is misappropriated by any coalition, any church, that claims God's truth, God's will is its own private property.

We need to stop shouting slogans at one another and learn again the gift of public discourse, expressing differences of opinion about important matters without calling into

question the political loyalty of religious orthodoxy of others.

May I suggest to you that we cannot and should not try to go back to a vision of our nation as an extension of Great Britain, white and Christian. But instead, in the name of the God of the whole creation, who created human beings in many colors, embrace with faith and eagerness the gorgeous pluralism which tries to exist here?

And may I suggest that it is our religious duty to welcome customs and mores of others, even when so to do means limiting our right to practice our own publicly.

And may I suggest that among our most precious values is a sense of the community, the public, the whole people, and that when all the people do not have access to the best the

culture produces – healthcare, education, public safety, housing, transportation, and opportunity – by reason of economics, race or political intent, it is our sacred duty to change the system and to do better. And that is the only way we will survive?

And we should, I presume to suggest, give God thanks for the precious experiment that in spite of its lapses, its occasional forgetfulness about its own most precious traditions, still intends to include all of God's children and to hold up to the world a picture of what human life under God's sovereignty might look like.

And may I suggest, finally, that not only did our Lord Jesus not suggest a separation of religion and politics, but quite the opposite, quite radically so? May I suggest that public political involvement is our sacred duty; that he calls us to give Caesar his due in the context of

God's sovereignty, the God of all people, all nations, all races...the God to whom we owe everything...and whom to serve is both our sacred duty and highest joy?